



THE 2005 T.T. REUTHER ORATION

National Lutheran Principals' Conference
Thursday 11th August 2005

Social Justice in a Lutheran School Context

*Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless
means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.*

(Friere)

*Walking away from the plight of the powerless means walking away from
Christ, but joining their struggle means walking the way of the cross.*

(Habel)

Norman C. Habel

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THE REUTHER ORATION

The Reuther Oration acknowledges the outstanding service of the Rev TT Reuther to Lutheran education in Australia from 1955, when he began duties as a chaplain at St Paul's College, Walla Walla, NSW, to 1993 when he retired from the position of National Director for Lutheran Schools.

Pastor Reuther's life within Lutheran schools commenced when he was a student first at Light Pass Lutheran Day school and later at Immanuel College.

After completing theological study at Immanuel Seminary he took the opportunity to undertake post graduate studies from 1950-1954 at Concordia Seminary, St Louis. Whilst on board ship (returning from the USA) he received a call to become chaplain at St Paul's College, Walla Walla, where he served to 1962.

After serving two parishes (Appila and Coonalpyn) from 1963-1968, he was called to be Headmaster of Concordia College Adelaide, where he joyfully served for fourteen years plus one term until 1983 where he accepted the invitation to become the inaugural national Director for Lutheran Schools.

During his outstanding service to Lutheran schools in Australia, he also completed Master Studies in Educational Administration.

He was an active member of the former Headmasters' Conference, member of the Australian Council of Education Administration, and honoured for his services to education by being made a Fellow of the Australian College of Education.

His ministry to Lutheran schools was highlighted by a professional approach based on a clear theological thinking. In the inaugural Reuther Oration, Pastor Reuther spoke of faithfulness, which was a characteristic that those associated with schools admired in him. He modeled faithfulness.

The Reuther Oration is designed to provoke and promote thinking about an aspect of Lutheran education. The Oration is usually delivered as part of the National Principals' Conference.

NORMAN C HABEL

Dr Norman Habel hails from Yulecart, near Hamilton in Victoria. He studied at Concordia Seminary in Adelaide and taught Old Testament for 14 years at Concordia Seminary, St Louis. In 1974 he returned to Australia and established the first Australian Religion Studies Department at what is now the University of South Australia. From 1984-1987 he was Principal of Kodaikanal International School in South India. During his time in India, he and his wife, Janice Orrell, established the Grihini program, a school and community health program for oppressed Tribal and Dalit women in the remote hills around Kodaikanal. From 1987-1996 he was Head of Religion and Director of Graduate Studies for the Faculty of Education at the University of South Australia.

Norman Habel is currently Professorial Fellow at Flinders University and teaches part time at the Adelaide College of Divinity which is affiliated with Flinders University. He has long been involved in issues of biblical interpretation and social justice. He pioneered the Religion Education course at the University of South Australia and for the past five years has been Chair of the Immanuel College Council. Recently he has taught a version of the TOPS course entitled 'Ten Lutheran Distinctives and their Connection with Education'.

In 2003 he was awarded Member of the Order of Australia (AM) for 'services to education and the development of courses in religious studies in tertiary institutions in Australia, to reconciliation and social justice, and to the environment.'

The 2005 Reuther Oration

Social Justice in a Lutheran School Context

When I first became principal of Kodaikanal International School in India, I made a number of mistakes, some quite innocently and some—as my colleagues said—quite deliberately. One action that my advisors said I would long regret was a public statement I made to the entire faculty at the very first staff meeting. I declared quite forcefully and quite explicitly that during the time I was principal I would never pay a bribe to anyone nor would I accept a bribe under any circumstances! The room was decidedly quiet until one person said, rather gingerly: ‘Then how did you manage to get the job of principal?’

The ramifications of my stand unfolded progressively as I sought to lead a complex international school in a country rife, not only with bribery as a way of life, but also as a cover for massive social injustice. But more of that later!

The issue of social justice in Lutheran schools is the topic requested by the sponsors of this oration. I am happy to oblige and in so doing to honour Tom Reuther for whom this issue was a genuine concern.

My presentation will focus on what I consider the essentials of the topic with the hope that this paper will serve as an educational resource for Challenge Four in the DVD Charter *Six Challenges-Six Mysteries*. The structure of my presentation will therefore be relatively simple posing the questions: What, why and how? What is social justice? Why should we, as Lutherans, get involved in social justice? How might we make social justice an integral part of our school community?

What is Social Justice in our contemporary world?

The South Australian Experiment

South Australia, unlike other states, was founded on an experiment connected with certain principles of a man named Wakefield. It was to be a colony without the convicts and evils of other colonies. South Australia was to be an ideal society, a just society.

Let us imagine, for a moment, that we are part of such an experiment by assuming that each of us belongs to one of several groups of people who plan to establish this new society. Each group, viewing society from its own perspective, has a vision of a just society. If these visions are combined, what might a just society be like? What would make it genuinely just?

The first group is the Kurna, the Indigenous people who already live here. The colonists call them Aborigines but we will use the name they prefer. They possess, in their own way, the land where this new society is to be built. They have already heard about what has happened to similar peoples in Sydney and Melbourne.

A second group is the educated men who lead the experiment; they are surveyors, merchants, administrators and a couple of clergy from diverse denominations. The educated men have the money, but they also have a dream.

A third group is the women, mostly wives of those leading the experiment. Some are independent women who want to make a new life for themselves. The women are expected to serve the men, but after several months on board ship cooped up with their partners they have developed ideas about what a new and just society might be.

A fourth group is the labourers brought along to clear the land, build homes and perform any duties the leaders might choose. They include sailors from the ships who have long endured oppressive treatment from their captains.

A fifth group is comprised of German immigrants, mostly farmers, who fled from their land rather than be forced to join the army of the German emperor. This ethnic group knows about farming and has strong feelings about fighting wars.

These five groups are part of our experiment. Imagine each of us belongs to one of these groups. How will we go about creating a just society? What kind of principles will we follow? What will make things free and fair for each group when living together?

Principles

At various times I have conducted this experiment with people interested in social justice, including in the mix both forthright feminists and dominant Lutheran dignitaries! In due course, a number of principles emerged that are consistent with those we commonly find in social justice documents. The principles include:

1. The principle of equal worth. How is it possible to live in such a way that each group is accorded equal worth and equal respect? One option would be to pool all resources and share the wealth equally. Will this work if the land and the money is shared equally?
2. The principle of equal voice. Each group has an equal voice in making decisions about how to establish and govern the new society. How would that work if the Kaurna were by far the greatest in number?
3. The principle of equal opportunity. Each group is to have an equal chance for its members to be educated to the highest level they choose, to pursue their own interests and ambitions. What if all want to become doctors or—heaven forbid—clergy?
4. The principle of liberty. Each group is to have an equal right to worship as it chooses, live the life style it prefers and follow the moral code it values. What happens if German farmers plough sacred Kaurna land?

What Went Wrong?

What happened to the ideal just society planned for South Australia? Generally, groups like the Kaurna were considered of less worth than the colonists? They were forced off their land and, in many cases, killed. The educated men retained the power, wealth and status associated with their office. Land was allocated to those who could afford it and they exploited it to the full. The women had no voice in decision making until much later.

Seventy years after their arrival, during the First World War, German immigrants were discriminated against and imprisoned. The labourers had no real opportunity to be educated or become leaders for a long time. The clergy, for the most part, agreed with the state of things and directed people to their future hope in heaven, leaving the question of justice on Earth largely to the government. In spite of an early experiment for Indigenous children at Piltawodli, the schools too seemed to support the status quo inherited from England.

Why is the utopian ideal of a just society imagined for South Australia highly problematic? Why is there such social injustice, oppression and poverty in societies throughout the world when we can apparently articulate such clear principles of equality and justice? Why? Why was the South Australian vision another failed utopia?

At this point we are likely to fall into a number of traps, popular explanations that imply social injustice is inevitable and that getting involved in the struggle against oppression is ultimately pointless.

Trap One: 'It's human nature!' Here we fall into the trap of saying human beings are naturally greedy, naturally oppressive or naturally unjust, and so there will always be injustice! 'There is a natural flaw in all of us.' Or as Lutherans have long said, we are all born sinners, and so some have a natural tendency to oppress others! But does the presence of sin mean humans cannot change, that God cannot create a just society, that Christ cannot be a means of resisting wrong and transforming lives?

Trap Two: 'There is something lacking in some people!' We fall into this trap when we say, for example, that the oppressed poor are at the bottom of the heap because that are said to lack the intelligence or drive of others. Or, we say that blacks have not evolved as far as whites, so they cannot do the jobs of whites and are necessarily under their control. This false explanation is often called 'the deficit theory.'

Trap Three: 'Blame the victim!' We fall into this trap when we say the poor are unemployed because they are lazy; 'they just will not go out and get a job'. Or again, men blame women for rape and violence because they say, 'the women ask for it!' In fact, rape is only one example of the power men have long assumed over women. Blaming the victim is another cover to justify accepted practices of injustice.

Trap Four: 'It's not injustice at all!' We fall into this trap when we say that this—an unequal society—is the way things are, the way God intended them to be. God gave women breasts so they should stay at home, feed their babies and take care of their husbands. That is their God-given role. Or, some people are less endowed than others intellectually and culturally. It is only natural that they should serve the more endowed. 'We can't all be bosses!' This makes inequality in society the work of God or the outcome of nature.

These traps demonstrate that behind the various expressions of power, domination and oppression there are specific beliefs and assumptions that serve to justify the injustice being perpetrated. For those in power there is a belief that they have the right to power, and that the exercise of power requires the use of force to be effective. The so-called 'divine right of kings' to exercise forceful control is found in various forms in many cultures even today, whether it be the assumed right of the wealthy or the popular belief that might is right, especially in war. Generally, those in power believe they have an earned or inherited right to exercise that power even if it requires the use of violence.

A Definition

Clearly, we must look beyond these underlying beliefs, expose them for what they are and reorient our thinking to social injustice. We need an approach that takes into account,

- a) the perspective of those oppressed,
- b) the social realities of our world and
- c) an underlying belief or ideology that is consistent with our Lutheran faith.

Our understanding of social justice must arise from a position of empathy. We need to find a way to stand with those oppressed.

Our analysis of social justice, I contend, must go beyond a broad vision of an ideal just and ordered society which, in the past, has frequently been generated by the educated few, to an empathetic understanding of the experience of those oppressed, dispossessed, alienated and abused. Our definition of social justice needs to begin with the struggle of oppressed groups against concrete injustices rather than broad visions of ideal societies.

For an excellent outline of major models of justice I recommend a work of Karen Lebacqz, entitled *Six Theories of Justice, Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics*. In the present educational context, and in the light of the preceding discussion, I would like to formulate the following definition of social justice as pertinent for our consideration:

Social justice is the struggle of disadvantaged groups to find and gain equal voice, equal worth and equal rights within the cultural context where they live.

A further word about the dimensions of this definition is in order. First, for those involved, social justice is a deep-seated 'struggle', not a recognised legal process or an accepted orderly social transition that can bring about the specific justice being sought by those oppressed in a particular way.

Second, social justice involves the struggles of a wide range of diverse social groups oppressed or disadvantaged in various ways. Some groups, such as the Tribals and Dalits in India have been surviving outside the caste system and entrenched in an abysmal abusive situation for several thousand years. Other groups, such as the Indigenous peoples of Australia have only known dispossession and racist humiliation for about two hundred years. Regardless of the time factor, the social injustice factor is a reality that usually affects such groups for generations.

Third, social justice involves the struggle of such groups to have their voice heard, a voice that has often been suppressed for centuries. Was the voice of the Kurna people ever heard in the South Australia experiment? Admittedly Kavel asserted that they should be given the choice of the best land and an Indigenous school was established at Piltawodli for a few years, but ultimately their voice was suppressed and their rights were denied.

Fourth, one of the greatest struggles of oppressed groups has been the struggle to overcome the relentless conditioning process by which those in power reduce the value, worth and importance of certain groups in society. For many, being poor, working class, inferior, unimportant and small is a false reality ingrained in their psyche from childhood. They are led to believe that this is their lot in life; they are 'born to serve' those in power.

Fourth, we need to recognise that the nature of the struggle and the understanding of justice for a given group will also be conditioned by the cultural context within which they survive. For the Kurna, who possessed their country in common, the right to own land is a foreign factor but the reality of dispossession is a brutal abuse. For the German Lutherans the purchase of land via the generosity of George Fife Angas was considered fair and just because they viewed justice from their European heritage rather than that of the local inhabitants.

I could explore the complexity of this definition further. I believe, however, it provides a sound basis for us to explore both the theological and educational implications of social justice in our contemporary world.

The Theological Basis for a Social Justice Programme

Given the preceding definition and understanding of social justice, why make a social justice programme an integral part of our Lutheran School system? Why promote social justice as a key component of education? What is the theological justification for making social justice more than just another course unit in our curriculum?

There have been many efforts to articulate social justice in theological terms. I believe, however, that there are three major theologies that provide both the ground and mission for facing the challenge of social justice as an integral part of the school life. The first of these is grounded in creation theology, the second in liberation theology and the third in a distinctive mystery of Lutheran theology. All three are worthy of serious consideration. It is the third of these that I contend deserves special consideration in our school strategy relating to the challenge of social justice.

'In God's image'

The common basis for a social justice mission is a particular creation theology. According to this approach we are all created in the image of God no matter what our country, culture or skin colour. This was the primary focus of Dr Ishmael Noko's comments at the 2004 ACLE Conference.

Noko spoke of all peoples of the world as an extended family of which we in Australia are a privileged part. He urged us not to exclude anyone from this family—the poor, the persecuted, the outcaste or those with HIV/AIDS! 'The exclusion of anyone', he said, 'on the basis of gender, race, colour, nationality, class, language or religion offends the image of God in that person'.

Much Catholic social justice teaching has, during the last century, been based on just such a creation theology.

It is the dignity of the person "created in God's image" that sets the stage. From Leo XIII in 1891 through John Paul II in 1981, the transcendental worth of persons is the foundation on which social structures must be built. People are prior to institutions and institutions exist

for the sake of people. People have rights which neither the state nor any institution may infringe. (Lebacqz 67)

The bishops declare that the fundamental criterion for assessing the economic system is impact on human dignity: *“The dignity of the human person, realised in community with others, is the criterion against which all aspects of economic life must be measured.”* (Lebacqz 71)

It can be argued that the Catholic tradition on social teachings is rooted in three basic affirmations:

- 1) the inviolable dignity of the human person (created in the image of God)
- 2) the essentially social nature of human beings (created to live as family/in community)
- 3) the belief that the abundance of nature and of social living has been created by God for all people to enjoy.

Significantly, it is not only that humans are created in God's image that is basic to this approach, but also a recognition that nature has been created for all God's family to share.

The underlying principle is that all creation is given for humankind; therefore each has the right to basic necessities and “all other rights whatsoever, including those of property and of free commerce, are to be subsumed under this principle” (Lebacqz 70)

This approach is quite different to the well known concept of the common good, meaning the promotion of a social order that enables ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’. The common good in this Catholic creation theology approach means that needs of the poor have priority and that the abundance of nature is to be shared first and foremost with those in need.

Creation theology can also be understood to include the truth that God who has created the physical world for all to enjoy also created societies or cultures where people could celebrate life in community openly, fairly and freely. The fact that historically the societies of ancient Israel, especially under figures like King Solomon, perpetrated a range of social injustices, does not negate the principle that God created all peoples in God's image. Ultimately, if all humans, male and female, are created in God's image, all are of equal worth before God. The struggle to be treated as an equal part of God's family is a deep-seated yearning we need to recognise in all humans.

‘Let the oppressed go free’

The second basic justification for serious involvement in social justice on all fronts, is the prophetic or liberation theology approach. According to this approach the God of the prophets is a God of justice who takes the side of the poor and the oppressed. Justice in prophetic terms is restoring the rights and lives of the poor. To know God is to do justice by following a deity who intervenes to liberate the oppressed from their plight.

In liberation theology,

‘Yahweh is the God who breaks into human history to liberate the oppressed....The all-surpassing characteristic of Yahweh is his acts in history as the God of justice and liberation for the sake of those who are weak and oppressed.’ (Lebacqz 106)

Jesus follows the prophetic tradition by proclaiming justice (Matt. 12.18,20). As Gutierrez states,

The work of Christ is present simultaneously as a liberation from sin and from all its consequences: despoliation, injustice, hatred. (Gutierrez, 158)

Salvation cannot be separated from social justice in liberation theology. Jesus is born into poverty, proclaims good news to the poor and freedom to those oppressed. One text that provides a charter for this approach is Luke 4.17-19. In this passage, we first meet Jesus in his home town of Nazareth. He attends worship at the synagogue and takes his turn reading the lesson for the day, namely, Isaiah 61.1-2. Jesus' reading would have been appropriate for the day had he not decided to respond to the message. The passage from Isaiah is about a prophet anointed by God specifically to

...bring good news to the poor,
...proclaim release to the captives,
...let the oppressed go free
...and proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

This scripture, says Jesus, is fulfilled in your hearing today! Today! This is the day of Jesus' call to be a prophet and begin a ministry of liberation. He recognises from the outset that, like Elijah and Elisha, a prophet is not welcome in his own country. But his prophetic ministry to liberate the poor and oppressed had begun. No wonder the crowd tried to throw this local carpenter off a cliff.

If we are to be disciples of this Christ, we will be with him in the struggle to rescue the poor and liberate the oppressed. This process, however, means more than meeting the needs of the poor. It means identifying with the oppressed and empowering them to find ways to free themselves from the powers that oppress them. And those powers, in liberation language, are the very structures of society that prevent groups in society from living free and equal lives with others.

'Taking up the cross'

While the two preceding approaches offer serious biblical and theological grounds for a strong social justice policy and programme in schools, I chose to orient the social justice challenge in *Six Challenges-Six Mysteries* towards a traditional Lutheran mystery known as *theologia crucis* – the theology of the cross. I did so because I believe this mystery links us with a profound understanding of God's role as the God of the cross as well as with our inherent response to God in Christ.

- a) The theology of the cross is, first of all, a theology of hidden revelation. The ultimate revelation of God is in the mystery of *deus crucifixus* and *deus absconditus*. God, amazingly, is fully revealed only through the hidden and scandalous way of the cross (Strelan, 100). Here there is no superman theology, but rather a suffering man theology, a suffering man who is also our suffering God. In that suffering figure on the cross, God is revealed for what God is—the one who suffers for us and with us. If you want to know what God is like, look at the face of the man on the cross!
- b) The theology of the cross is the mystery of God assuming flesh and becoming a slave. God , according to Paul
...emptied himself,
taking on the form of a slave,
being born in human likeness.
And being found in human form
he humbled himself
and became obedient unto death—
even death on a cross! (Phil. 2.7-8)

In this passage we discern the truth that God not only identifies with humanity in general, but with oppressed humans—with the slaves of society. As one of the oppressed, Jesus suffers at the hands of oppressive individuals and structures. The way of the cross for Christ is the way of bringing life by joining those who are suffering oppression.

And, says, Paul, are called to have the 'same mind' as Christ, to think like Christ, being ready to surrender our lives to follow the way of the cross. We are called to 'become slaves' so that those who are slaves may become free.

- c) To live the theology of the cross is not to achieve piety through imitation of Jesus or to gain greatness through service, but to identify with the suffering Christ and thereby participate with Christ in the struggle against sins/evils which cause suffering.

Luther did not consider the cross of Christ primarily as the supreme example of humility which we are called to imitate. Instead it was that act by which Christ endured the actual punishment for our sin. For this reason his cross is identical with ours, because he bore our punishment upon the cross. (Prenter, 223)

This point needs emphasising. When we walk the way of the cross we carry the cross of Christ, we identify with Christ, the one who became a suffering slave for us and all humans.

- d) Bearing servants of Christ and bearing the cross of Christ means far more than following the example of Christ; it means being empowered by the Spirit to find service including involvement in the struggle of those who suffer oppression.

The cross is more than a burden; when we take up the cross and follow Christ (Matt. 16.24), we are empowered to walk the way of the cross in the battle against the forces of evil and injustice.

The way of the cross is not to seek glory, but to serve as Christ served. The way of glory—even the theology of glory—is the way of power, greed and selfishness that is typical among human beings.

The Lutheran approach, I would argue, lies in the profound mystery of the theology of the cross. Social justice is the inevitable result of identifying with the cross, the Christ of the cross and the suffering God of the cross.

Following this mystery, we are not simply content to follow the example of Jesus as one concerned about the poor, nor is it merely a matter of doing our Christian duty to care for the poor. Rather, we here identify with the Christ who suffered for the very people who abused, oppressed and crucified him. By so doing we bear the same cross, as Christ continues to suffer with those who are oppressed, dispossessed and depressed. In Christ and with Christ we identify with the oppressed.

Is Christ a Dalit—one of the Crushed?

Another way of exploring the theological dimensions of social justice is to consider how, in a given context of social injustice, an oppressed group understands the way God is involved in the social justice struggle of a particular oppressed community.

In the Rainbow Spirit Theology of an Indigenous group from Queensland, the point of departure is creation, or more specifically, the land. The Rainbow Spirit is the Creator Spirit present deep in the land. The Rainbow Spirit is crying because the deep spiritual bonds between the land and its people have been broken. It is this same Rainbow Spirit who camps among the Indigenous peoples and 'becomes one of us'.

This means that for these Aboriginal Australians, Christ is revealed not as a German Jesus, an English Jesus or even a Jewish Jesus, but as an Aboriginal Jesus. (Rainbow Spirit Elders, 61)

The Christ who suffered on the cross for us continues to suffer with the land and the people of the land. In the suffering of the suffering of the land and the people of the land we see Christ suffering and we hear Christ crying out. (Rainbow Spirit Elders, 67)

In other words, this Indigenous approach begins with a traditional creation theology, but ultimately follows with a theology of the cross which identifies the presence of the suffering God both among the oppressed people and in the alienated land.

The theology of black theologians, such as James Cone, is grounded in liberation thinking. For them, the Exodus of God's people from Egypt means that God's revelation was an act of liberation. We know God through God's past liberating intervention in history and by identifying with God's current liberating work among the oppressed.

Black theology says that as Father, God identified with oppressed Israel participating in the bringing into being of this people; as Son, he became the Oppressed One in order that all may be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit he continues the work of liberation. (Cone, 122)

The emerging Dalit theology of India reflects the struggle to face centuries of oppression both within the caste system and the Christian church. Christians originating from untouchable castes form the

majority of the churches of India. Yet even there they have suffered discrimination in worship, life and death. Sarai Chatterji quotes Fr Jose Kananaikai as saying:

Even in death we are not spared. Cemeteries are divided and one part is assigned for us with an impregnable wall dividing us from the so-called high caste Catholics. (Chatterji, 27)

For the Dalits—the Crushed Ones—the experience is one of being ‘no humans’. The caste system with its inherent rejection of ‘untouchables’ as outside the body of genuine human beings has constructed in the Dalits an identity of being ‘no humans’. For them the task of theology, therefore, is to confess their past experience of ‘no-humanness’ and affirm Dalits as human beings, created in God’s image and of great worth to Christ. (Habel 1996, 71)

The re-reading of the history of the Dalits can be viewed from a number of perspectives. The tendency to read their history from the perspective of pathos, from the vantage point of the Crucified One and a theology of the cross, point to a Lutheran focus that has faded in our affluent developed world.

This means that the Jesus of India is to be found in the midst of the struggle of the Dalits for liberation. Traditional missionaries said they represented Christ to the Indian people. Their message of salvation and their selfless care were to be signs of Christ’s presence in India. Dalit theology reverses this orientation. Now the task is to discern Christ in each oppressed village among the millions of Dalit poor. (Habel 1996, 71-72).

All of these theological orientations make it clear that just as Christ identified with the poor and oppressed of his day, so we too must learn to discern Christ present among, suffering with, and sustaining the oppressed, whether they be Dalits, Indigenous Australians, people with disabilities or abused refugees. The task is not to take up our own personal cross, but to take up the cross of Christ in whatever oppressed community we may find Christ at work.

The Task of Implementing a Social Justice Programme

Given the definition of social justice enunciated above, the relatively affluent and elite nature of our Lutheran schools, and the theological perspective proposed, how might we implement a social justice programme in our schools. There are, I believe, three levels of involvement that Lutheran school need to consider if they are to face Challenge Four in the ACLE Charter: *Six Challenges-Six Mysteries*.

The first level is an *awareness* programme that enables our students to see beyond their affluent environment and discern the realities of injustice, both locally and in the wider world.

The second level is a stirring of the *conscience* in both students and school that will move them to take a stand with the oppressed against injustice .

The third level is an active *involvement* in the struggle of the oppressed by participating in appropriate resistance activities.

Awareness: Listening, Learning and Naming

Level One requires a programme that raises student and staff awareness of social injustice as a live and current issue. Young children growing up in comfortable homes surrounded by love and fair treatment are likely to be relatively ignorant of the nature of social injustice in their immediate and wider surroundings. Even though we meet isolated cases of such injustice in TV programmes like Four Corners and some newspaper reports, most children are not very newspaper or TV news literate. They watch kids’ shows that tend to avoid these issues.

If we are serious about introducing social justice, we need to consider a strategy that raises awareness to social injustice in our curriculum courses, in chapel and related public arenas and in specific social justice projects. A major dilemma is what areas of social justice to select as appropriate for given age levels. Social injustice can be found as close to home as how Muslim refugees are treated to the massive oppression of labourers in lands such as Bangladesh where

there are some half a million bonded labourers. Social bias can be found in local racism as well as in the casteism that controls much of Indian society.

In line with our definition of social justice, I believe it is important for the voices of those dispossessed or disadvantaged to be heard publicly in our schools, whether in assemblies, classrooms or camps. When the voice is heard, there is often a greater readiness to explore the experiences of the oppressed group and become aware of the forms of injustice involved. When a social injustice story is told, the children are more likely to listen with their heart and seek to explore the causes of the injustice.

One voice that I recall quite vividly is that of a black student from South Africa who spoke at assembly at my international school in India in 1986. In South Africa, he said, there are two gods, the white God and the black God. They are very different. The white God is all-powerful and has invested his power in the white rulers of South Africa. He has given them the territory of South Africa as their promised land and expects them to follow him by controlling the black people and making them subservient Christians. The black God is the God of the oppressed black people. The black God suffers with the black people, promises them hope and reminds them that the way of the cross leads eventually to a resurrection. Which God should I follow if I want to succeed or even survive in South Africa?

The initial task for a student is to name the injustice and explore its nature. The student is invited to explore the world of an oppressed group, such as those with physical disability and ask searching questions: Why are these people disabled? What happened to them? What is it like being disabled? In Australia? In India? In Africa? How do other people treat them? What names do they call them? How have they tried to overcome their oppressive situation? Why are roughly one in ten people in the world disabled? Does poverty create disability?

Ultimately the student will seek to explain the forces and factors that create and sustain the injustices that beset societies across the world. In so doing, there is always the possibility that what is uncovered is uncomfortable. Our own power structures, whether in education, politics or elsewhere, may in fact be contributing to the perpetuation of unjust policies and practices in our own community.

Conscience: Beyond Compassion and Caring

A second level in a social justice programme involves stirring the conscience in both students and school so that they are ready to take a stand with the oppressed against injustice .

One of the legitimate ways to begin developing a second level social justice programme is to identify communities that have experienced just such injustice. When the poverty, pain and needs of such communities becomes apparent to children, a sense of compassion is often aroused among the students. Images, stories, voices and reports of oppressed communities are readily available from bodies such as Caritas or Australian Lutheran World Service. Locally Lutheran Community Care or Anglicare offer opportunities for students to explore and reach out to less fortunate or alienated people in our community.

One such project that I observed recently is the Christmas Box appeal at St Johns Lutheran School in Highgate. The children, with the support of their families, prepared Christmas boxes to be handed to poor children in Cambodia who were deprived of such gifts. This giving aroused in the children a sense of connection and compassion for people in need in another part of the world. As one child said, 'It makes me feel good to see a poor child happy when they get a Christmas box'.

Social justice, however, is more than feeling good about our kind deeds toward poor children. As James Cone, the black theologian said,

People who want to know who God is and what he is doing must know who black people are and what they are doing. This does not mean lending a helping hand to the poor and unfortunate blacks in society. It does not mean joining the war on poverty. Such acts are sin offerings that represent a white way of assuring themselves that they are basically a good people. Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with

them and participating in the goal of liberation. *We must become black with God.* (Cone, 124)

Social justice means moving from compassion to conscience. The education process needs to move from evoking a sense of compassion for those in need to developing a conscience about the plight of those experiencing injustice. The students viewing the footage of the children in Cambodia need to ask why those children are so poor, why some children are trapped in refugee camps for years, and why other children are prevented from having an education that enables them to live in the mainstream of their society. Australian students viewing the footage of Asian students excluded from mainstream society, need to ask whether there are students who have been prevented from enjoying the education of a Lutheran school here in Australia.

In the ACLE Charter for Lutheran school we said that *a 2020 Lutheran School will have a conscience active in the school community and alive to the social needs and injustices in the world.*

Having a conscience means asking why, taking to heart the issue and refusing to ignore the injustice. Having a conscience about a social injustice means having a sense of responsibility, an inner urge to take a stand. Having a Christian conscience means discerning the presence of the suffering Christ among the people of an oppressed community and identifying with them.

Creating a conscience about injustice, wrongs and social issues in our society can be understood from three perspectives—individual, communal and global. In the past there has been a tendency to say that the educative role of the school was to impart the values necessary for students to develop their individual consciences—whatever is required to make them good citizens in their own countries.

The challenge before us is not only to move from compassion to conscience, but also from an individual to a communal conscience. The question is whether the educative process remains in the classroom where students can explore how they may one day individually come to terms with the injustices in their immediate or wider world, or whether the school as a community intends to tackle one or more such injustices and openly tackle them.

A number of Catholic schools have become involved as communities in speaking out against the injustices perpetrated against the powerless detainees in Baxter Detention Centre and elsewhere. The school as a whole listens to the voices of refugees from Iran, Afghanistan and elsewhere. A communal conscience is developed as students and staff come to know the dimensions of the social injustice for detainees and, as a school, identify with those in detention.

It is, of course, one thing to explore a local injustice as a school and quite another to speak out publicly against that injustice. The implications for the school need to be assessed. Ultimately, the school leaders will need to ask a) whether Christ is suffering in Baxter, b) whether the school as a whole is ready to be identified as one committed to social justice and c) whether the students will discover profound meaning in giving voice to their conscience in public.

The option of developing a global conscience in the students is linked to Challenge Three in the Charter *Six Challenges Six Mysteries*. Both Ishmael Noko and Pater Ellyard challenged us to look beyond our local community and recognise that we are part of a global family. And members of that family throughout the world are being abused, oppressed and broken. The outside world of injustice is so vast, a school may feel threatened by even contemplating involvement in the struggles of oppressed groups in the world family.

However, the simple action of linking up with a sister school in Indonesia or with an organisation empowering an oppressed community in India, such as Oxfam or ALWS may provide the concrete context for exploring a local injustice and stirring a global conscience.

Involvement: Learning the Art of Resistance

What happens when we move to level three and get involved in the struggle of groups against injustice? The preceding process of naming, explaining and facing the injustices in our society are designed to prepare us for action. Moved by our social conscience, we are ready to select a social issue in which we will become involved.

Involvement in the struggle of group seeking to overcome injustice is sometimes called resistance, or more specifically, non-violent resistance. This model is the way of peacemakers and, I would argue, the way of the cross. Non-violent resistance is:

- a) ...a way to fight against injustice and war without using violence. It is the force of love and truth that seeks change for human life, that resists injustice, that refuses cooperation with violence and systems of death.
- b) ...the willingness to take on suffering ourselves in order to right wrongs, in order to change the evil system of death all around us into freedom and life and love for everyone.
- c) ... a willingness to suffer and not to strike back...to free our adversaries by exposing all the violence and injustice that is hidden or covered up...so that their eyes may be opened and their participation in the injustice becomes apparent to them. (Dear, 7)

Resistance offers a planned and organised model consistent with our theological basis as we consider the level of involvement desirable in our schools. Resistance is joining the struggle for justice that is consistent with our social conscience. Resistance is confronting the forces of injustice without being seduced by their controlling techniques. Education is resistance is a serious option if we proceed to level three involvement in social justice. (See *Teaching for Resistance* by Education for Social Justice Research Group)

Becoming involved, as a school, in three levels of a social justice programme will require

- 1) Naming and analysing the social injustice selected
- 2) Listening to the voices of those oppressed by the injustice
- 3) Exploring the forces and factors controlling the injustice
- 4) Analysing ways the injustice has been resisted in the past
- 5) Examining the obstacles and dangers of being involved
- 6) Developing a strategy for being involved with a particular group
- 7) Reflecting again on the *theologia crucis* orientation of the plan

Let me tell you a resistance story involving social injustice in India. All the senior level students in Kodaikanal International School were required to visit, analyse and report on specific social situations in the mountains of South India where the school was located. A group of year nine students visited a logging camp some miles away in a higher mountain range. They discovered a blatant case of bonded labour. These labourers were expatriate Tamils who had returned to Tamil Nadu in India from Sri Lanka with the promise of work and a new future.

They were assigned to the Tan India logging company where they basically became slaves. There was no toilets, no health care, no education facilities—nothing except a brush shelter and third grade rice brought in once a week.

The students brought the report to me and requested that I submit it to the government authorities. They essentially told me to put my money where my mouth was. You stand for social justice, Dr Habel? Show us! Submit the report.

Previous reports by various groups were suppressed. The parties involved accepted a bribe and the report disappeared. By chance, the new Collector in charge of the region was from the North and was genuinely concerned about justice. He was not taking bribes from the local logging company or forestry officials. So when I submitted the report to the Collector, he took up the challenge and submitted the report, along with other materials, to the authorities in Delhi.

Within months there was a supreme court commission investigating the case. And I was summoned to testify to the truth of the student report. Of course, once word got out about the commission, my school was under fire. The forestry officials banned anyone from the school entering the forest. All visas for students planning to return home for Christmas were withheld. My phone was tapped and I was accused of accepting huge bribes from the builder in the construction of our Middle School. The file of false charges against me is enormous, the price of identifying with the poor.

One solution was to use the well established bribery system. My solution was to find a way that would be in the best interests of the students. I would sacrifice my career in India. By agreeing to leave and never work in India again, the school could return to normal. The verdict of bonded labour against the company was upheld and the name of the school as one committed to social justice still stands.

Conclusion

Paulo Freire is reported to have said,

Washing one's hands of the conflict between the powerful and the powerless means to side with the powerful, not to be neutral.

Let me formulate an alternative axiom,

Walking away from the plight of the powerless means walking away from Christ, but joining their struggle means walking the way of the cross.

Perhaps we need to follow the challenge of Daniel Overduin and develop a Lutheran *Rerum Novarum* as the Catholics did (Overduin, 105). Perhaps our Lutheran schools are in a position to take up this challenge: *A Catechism for Social Justice in Lutheran Schools*. Another model may be the famous *Kairos Document* that emerged in South Africa in 1986.

Facing the challenge of social justice is, I believe, no longer an option for Lutheran schools. The only question is how!

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